

## Article

# Dressed for the Part: Clothing as Narrative Enquiry into Gender, Class, and Identity of Pauper Lunatics at Whittingham Asylum, England, 1907-1919

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*Hunt, Carole ORCID: 0000-0002-2702-6003 (2019) Dressed for the Part: Clothing as Narrative Enquiry into Gender, Class, and Identity of Pauper Lunatics at Whittingham Asylum, England, 1907-1919. The Journal of Dress History, 3 (2). pp. 47-78. ISSN 2515-0995*

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# The Journal of Dress History

Volume 3, Issue 2, Summer 2019



Editor-in-Chief	Jennifer Daley
Proofreader	Georgina Chappell
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Published by  
The Association of Dress Historians  
[journal@dresshistorians.org](mailto:journal@dresshistorians.org)  
[www.dresshistorians.org](http://www.dresshistorians.org)



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Volume 3, Issue 2, Summer 2019

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[www.dresshistorians.org](http://www.dresshistorians.org)

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ISSN 2515-0995  
Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) accession #988749854

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**Dressed for the Part:  
Clothing as Narrative Enquiry into  
Gender, Class, and Identity of Pauper Lunatics at  
Whittingham Asylum, England, 1907–1919**

Carole Hunt

**Abstract**

This article examines clothing as narrative enquiry into gender, class, and identity of pauper lunatics at Whittingham Asylum, near the city of Preston, Lancashire, in northwest England, 1907–1919. This research centres on a collection of female admissions records and photographic portraits. The analysis is interdisciplinary. Theoretical perspectives from fashion, feminist discourse, history, anthropology, and material culture are combined with the writings of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag, as well as contemporary literary sources, to explore the social and cultural realities embedded in the clothing of those women featured.

## Introduction

In 1868, due to a shortage of space in the existing county lunatic asylums in the cities of Lancaster, Prestwich, and Rainhill, Lancashire county magistrates agreed to build a fourth asylum for pauper lunatics.<sup>1</sup> The new asylum was to be in the village of Goosnargh, Lancashire county, near the city of Preston. Whittingham Asylum officially opened on 1 April 1873 and was originally designed to accommodate 1000 patients. It was to become one of the largest mental hospitals in England, eventually housing 3,533 patients.<sup>2</sup> The asylum was a village in its own right (Figure 1), with a church, five farms, a brewery, and staff accommodation. It had its own laundry, post office and telephone exchange, reservoir, gas works, and a railway station. The full site covered many acres (Figure 2). Large numbers of the local population were employed at the institution. The Victorian decision to build large asylums across the country was to impact on the provision of mental health services for over a century.<sup>3</sup>

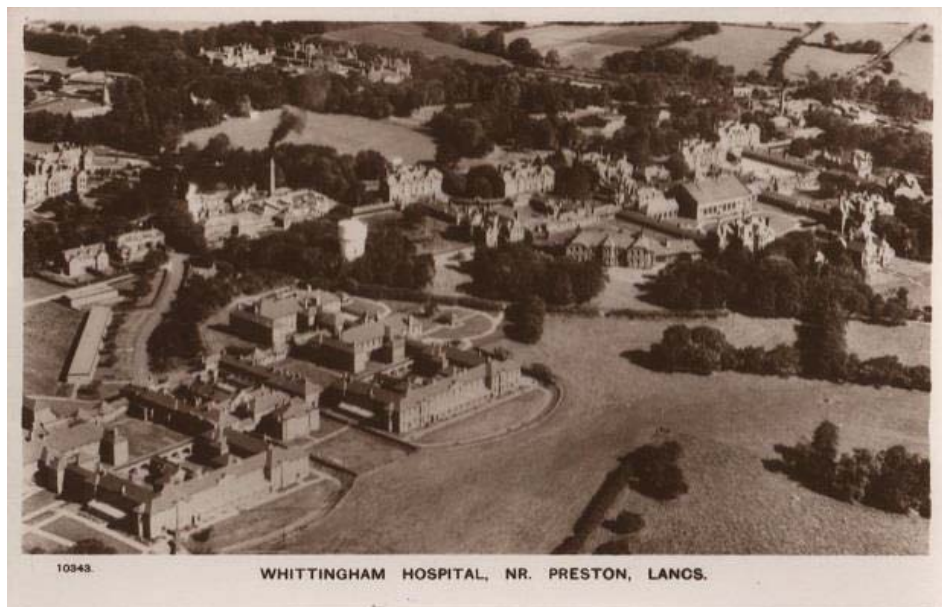


Figure 1:

*Postcard of the Original Buildings of Whittingham Asylum*, Unknown Date,  
© Lancashire Archive and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bartlett, *The Poor Law of Lunacy: The Administration of Pauper Lunacy in Mid Nineteenth Century England*, Leicester University Press, London, England, 1999, pp. 53–55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

Bartlett offers a detailed account of overcrowding and the lack of space in English county lunatic asylums.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Pettigrew, Rory W. Reynolds, and Sandra Rouse, *A Place in the Country: Three Counties Asylum, 1869–1998*, South Bedfordshire Community Health Care Trust, Bedford, Hertfordshire, England, 1998, pp. 39–40.



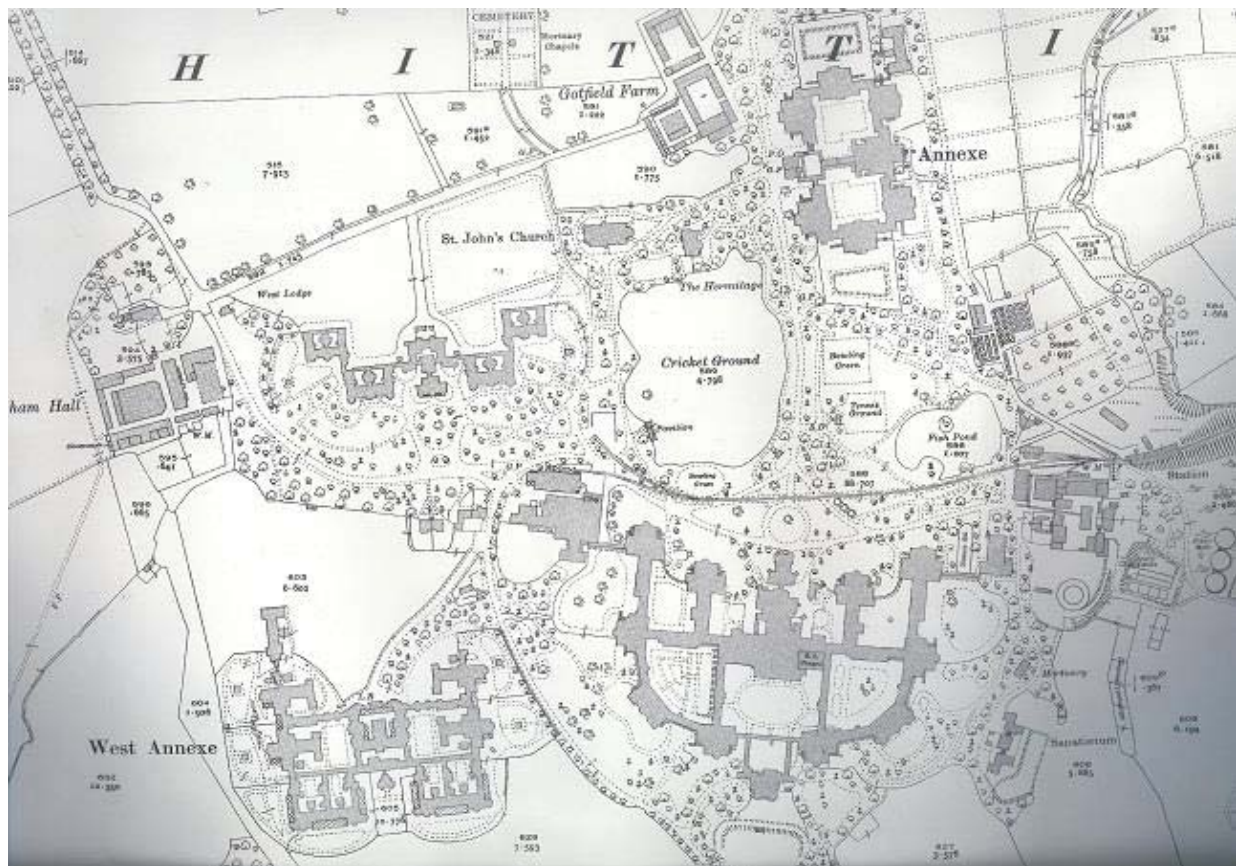


Figure 2:

*Map Showing the Scale and Layout of Whittingham Asylum, 1912,*  
 © Lancashire Archive and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England.

Launched in 2017, Whittingham Lives is a multi-disciplinary, two-year arts and heritage project exploring the history and legacy of Whittingham Asylum, from its opening in 1873 to its demolition in 2016. One of the creative outputs of the project was the 2018 exhibition, *Whittingham Lives: Hidden Histories, Alternative Futures*, held at the Harris Museum, Art Gallery and Library in Preston, Lancashire. The exhibition was a creative response to the asylum, combining personal experiences with social, cultural, and historical observations. The central aim of the exhibition was to examine attitudes towards mental distress in the past, the present, and thus to influence attitudes for the future. A collection of artworks made up the installation, *Dressed for the Part* (Figure 3) that explored the link between clothing and the management of women patients in Whittingham Asylum during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Figure 3:  
*Dressed for the Part Installation*, Carole Hunt, 2018,  
 Whittingham Lives: Hidden Histories, Alternative Futures Exhibition,  
 Harris Museum, Art Gallery and Library, Preston, Lancashire, England,  
 Photographed by Alex Hurst, 10 October 2018, © Carole Hunt.

The installation, *Dressed for the Part*, formed the centrepiece of the *Hidden Histories, Alternative Futures* exhibition. The research that informed the installation—especially an examination of the primary sources—also informs this article, which develops the themes of gender, class, and identity.

The discussion in this article begins with an examination of a separate but related and important artefact, to set the scene. This is followed by a description of the theoretical framework within which the study sits, an examination of terminology and the research methodology, before moving on to the analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary sources. This section includes different approaches to textual analysis and dress communication theory. The article concludes that social and cultural norms around dress, especially in relation to women, respectability, and femininity, informed not only how women should look but also defined how they should “be.” Clothing identified the patient as female, pauper, and inmate. Lunacy had its own particular language of dress.

### **The Jacket of Agnes Emma Richter (1844–1918)**

“Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us...There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.”<sup>4</sup>

—Virginia Woolf, 1928

One of the most interesting items of The Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg University Hospital in Heidelberg, Germany, is a petite handmade linen jacket dated 1895 (Figure 4). The jacket belonged to Agnes Emma Richter (1844–1918), a patient who spent 25 years of her life in a Saxony mental institution. The jacket has rarely been

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, Penguin, London, England, 1995, p. 143.

This quotation was originally published in the first edition of *Orlando*, Hogarth Press, London, England, 1928.



on public display, but it has long captivated art historians.<sup>5</sup> Carefully unwrapped from its protective packaging, the tiny jacket is mesmerising. Alterations and modifications to the design of the jacket reveal that Agnes was a skilled seamstress. The jacket has been discussed, from within the context of the time from which it was made and worn and within the context of institutional dress.<sup>6</sup> But it is the embroidered text, in five colours (Figure 5), across almost every inch of the garment, rather than its design, that is fascinating. The interior text is blurred with wear and certain sections have become unravelled. “Ich” (I) is the easiest word to discern.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Agnes’ laundry number 583, a “patient identifier,” also features repeatedly amongst the writing.<sup>8</sup> The jacket’s narrative tells us that Agnes felt driven to document her experiences.<sup>9</sup> Agnes’ skill with a needle provided her with this opportunity. The jacket’s construction, shape, and colour are of curiosity with regard to the history of institutional dress. But, equally, marked by its everyday use, the underarm stains and indecipherable text are an intimate record of Agnes’ everyday existence and experience.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 4:

*Handmade Jacket, Embroidered with Autobiographical Text  
By Agnes Emma Richter (1844–1918),*

©The Prinzhorn Collection, Centre for Psycho Social Medicine,  
University Hospital Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany, Inv. 743, c. 1894.

<sup>5</sup> Gail A. Hornstein, *Agnes’s Jacket: A Psychologist’s Search for the Meaning of Madness*, PCCS Books Ltd, Monmouth, Monmouthshire, Wales, 2014, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Nicole Baur and Joseph Melling, “Dressing and Addressing the Mental Patient: The Uses of Clothing in Admission, Care, and Employment of Residents in English Provincial Mental Hospitals, c. 1860–1960,” *Textile History*, Volume 45, Issue 2, November 2014, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Hornstein, op cit., p. x.

<sup>8</sup> Baur and Melling, op cit., p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Hornstein, op cit.

<sup>10</sup> Carole Hunt, “Worn Clothes and Textiles as Archives of Memory,” *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2014, p. 208.

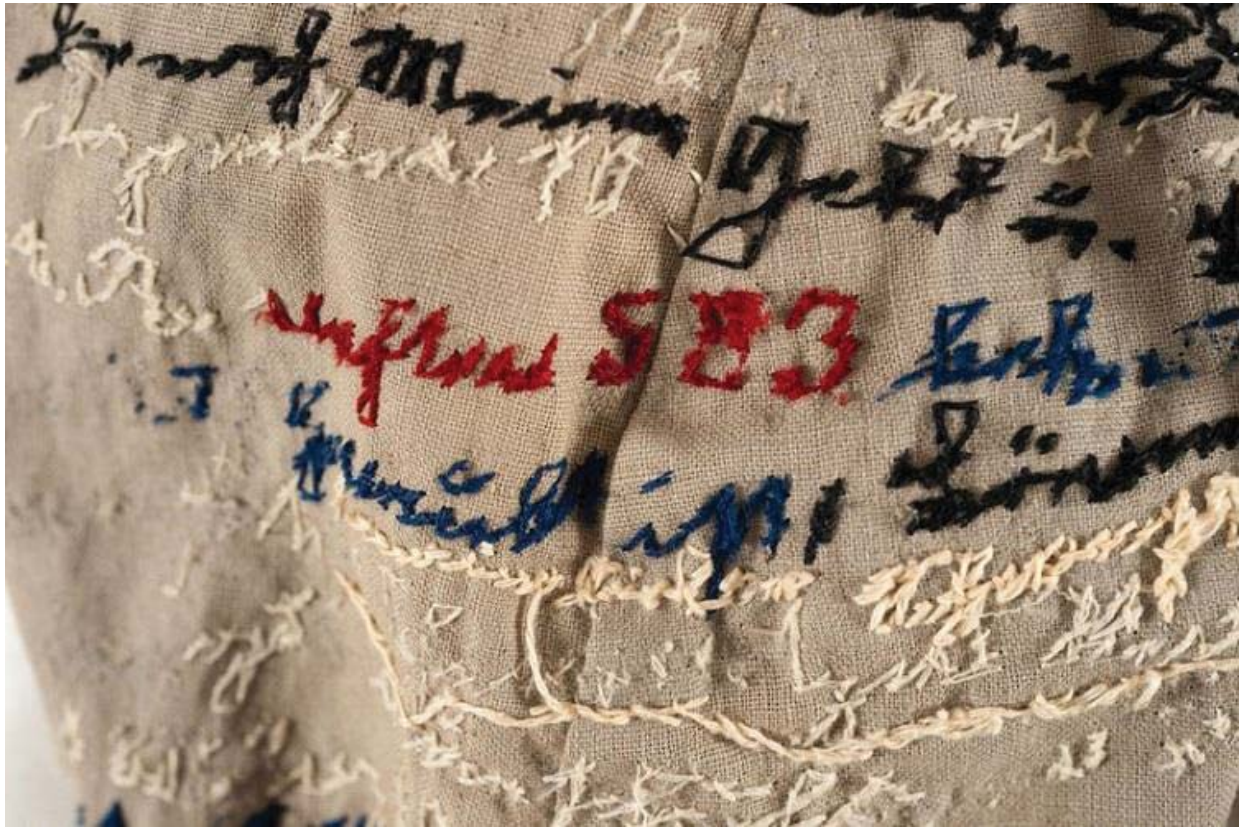


Figure 4:

Detail, *Handmade Jacket, Embroidered with Autobiographical Text*  
By Agnes Emma Richter (1844–1918),

©The Prinzhorn Collection, Centre for Psycho Social Medicine,  
University Hospital Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany, Inv. 743, c. 1894.

Both Agnes' jacket and Woolf's statement have influenced this study into madness, gender, class, and identity. Both highlight how clothing can be a powerful tool with which to express our identity, how clothing can influence how we are perceived by others, and how clothing can have psychological implications for its wearer. Agnes' jacket adds a further dimension. It demonstrates the value of clothing as an important artefact of historical, cultural, and symbolic value, one which can be analysed and interpreted long after the life of its wearer.

### Theoretical Framework: Material Matters

Barnard argues that there has been a growing interest across fashion disciplines in exploring theoretical approaches to examine the social and cultural role of fashion, and especially in relation to gender and identity.<sup>11</sup> Sociological analysis of fashion and identity can be further understood in feminist discourse. For example, Iris Marion Young describes clothing as the “frontier between the self and the social,” where dress plays a role in simultaneously revealing and concealing our identities.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, clothing and textiles as economic currency, the role of women within their production, and within social structures of class and power, have also been examined.<sup>13</sup> However, as Nicole Baur and Joseph Melling have argued, “Although there has been much scholarly debate on insanity and its historical origins and representations, little attention has been given to institutional clothing and its role.”<sup>14</sup> Baur and Melling argue that understanding of asylum dress from a social and cultural perspective remains limited. Given the amount of attention given to dress and appearance in our culture, this is surprising.<sup>15</sup> Baur and Melling highlight a limitation for this study. Both primary and secondary written sources concerned directly with asylum clothing are scarce. Therefore, this article draws heavily on the writings of Baur and Melling (2014) and Hamlett and Hoskins (2013).

Dress has frequently been alluded to in accounts of women and insanity in intellectual and cultural thought. Elaine Showalter argues that characters such as Crazy Jane and Shakespeare’s Ophelia are fascinating historical examples of exchanges between romantic cultural images of madwomen and historical psychiatric ideologies. Crazy Jane is an historical fictional madwoman whose appearance carried messages about both her insanity and her femininity.<sup>16</sup> Disarray, a lack of decorum, and wilful destruction of dress have seemingly provided important clues to a woman’s state of

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<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Barnard, “Fashion and Fashion Theories,” in Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, England, 2007, pp. 11–13.

<sup>12</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” in Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss, eds., *On Fashion*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States, 1994, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> Margreta de Grazia, *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, England, 1996, pp. 189–209.

<sup>14</sup> Baur and Melling, op cit., p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*, Virago, London, England, 1987, pp. 11–13.

Showalter offers a detailed account of the development of Romantic madwoman Crazy Jane as a tragic and vulnerable character.

mind.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, historically, too much attention to dress—as well as too little—has also been considered a sign of madness.<sup>18</sup> The attitude towards women's appearance and their state of mind was summed up by John Connolly, a physician at Hanwell Asylum, near London, one of the largest lunatic asylums in England during the 1840s. Connolly stated, "Dress is women's weakness and in the treatment of lunacy it should be an instrument of control and therefore of recovery."<sup>19</sup> The discussion has highlighted that clothing and appearance have occupied an important space in the history and representation of women's mental health, helping to define their insanity, treatment, and care. However, Baur and Melling (2014) have highlighted a need for further understanding of institutional dress. Following Baur and Melling, the article will examine the clothing of female patients incarcerated at Whittingham Asylum during 1907–1919, from a social, cultural, and ideological perspective. However, rather than the disciplines of social history and health studies, the analysis is contextualised within the theoretical framework of fashion and dress research.

### A Note on Terminology: Fashion or Dress?

In fashion studies, the terms fashion, dress, clothing, costume, and so forth are often used interchangeably. Yuniya Kawamura has stressed the importance of debating the exact meaning and definition of fashion terminology but at the same time recognises a flexibility around these terms.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim differentiate clearly between the terms, dress and fashion, in research.<sup>21</sup> Whilst there is clearly a generic "thingness," an embedded understanding of a language and terminology that unites scholars of fashion and textiles, words carry implications, and language is an important tool in influencing how something is perceived and understood.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Baur and Melling, op cit., pp. 148–149.

The authors offer a detailed account of the link between dress and appearance, women, and mental illness.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress: An Introduction to Qualitative Methods*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, England, 2011, pp. 7–9.

<sup>21</sup> Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object Based Research in Fashion*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, England, 2015, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Perennial Classics, New York, New York, United States, 2001, pp. 161–184.



In the early twentieth century, the style of institutional clothing worn by female patients was influenced by women's fashion. However, the standardised dress of patients also carried specific social and cultural messages. The term, fashion, and the accompanying signifiers of trend, vogue, or craze are incompatible with those garments issued to women on admission to Whittingham Asylum during the early twentieth century, when "getting dressed" did not involve choice. The term, dress, as a noun—clothing of a specified kind (and for a specific purpose)—is better suited. The term, dress, may well conjure an item of clothing worn by women. For clarification, the term, dress, is used more generically in this article, to conceptualise the everyday appearance, or image, of female patients through their clothing. The terms, clothing and garment, are also used interchangeably in the examination of a singular item's everyday usage and wear.

### Research Methodology: Immaterial Evidence

The jacket of Agnes Emma Richter (Figure 4) provided primary evidence of asylum clothing, its aesthetic, and the social and cultural beliefs of another time. Close analysis revealed how the garment was worn and altered. The jacket's "truthful" shape, the permanent marks and stains of recorded human interaction, provide the opportunity for sensory embodied experience which is outside written and visual form.<sup>23</sup> The jacket highlights the value of clothing as artefact; an object of historical, social, and cultural value and curiosity, its interpretation is through close examination and meticulous analysis of its physical characteristics. However, a number of visits to Lancashire Archive and Record Office and the Museum of Lancashire, during the early stages of this research, revealed that there are no known surviving garments from Whittingham Asylum.

This absence highlighted a potential limitation to the study. It also brought into focus questions relating to collecting, and the collection. Clothing and textiles need to be discussed within the context of their preservation, in deciding what is to be kept and how best to keep it, and who decides. But there are other questions, relating to the concept of value, which come to the fore; questions regarding the preservation of certain items over the disappearance of others.<sup>24</sup> As James Deetz suggests, although

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<sup>23</sup> Carole Hunt, op cit.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Translated from the French by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, United States, 1998, p. 28.

Derrida has argued that archives are political spaces in deciding what is to be kept, what is to be discarded, and for what purpose.



items may not always be beautiful, they are representative of the world of the people who lived during this time.<sup>25</sup> Nineteenth and twentieth century dress and textile collections have mainly focused on clothing (fashion) worn by the wealthy, comprising the cutting edge of fashion and style. Clothes of the poor, however, were unlikely to excite the attention of collections and museums.<sup>26</sup> In addition, items of clothing worn by the wealthy have typically been more expensive and therefore carefully stored and saved. This is not the case for clothes worn by the poor; these clothing items were typically inexpensive to purchase. Garments worn by the poor were quite literally worn out, handed down, mended, cut up, and often made into other garments. Surviving examples of asylum patient clothing are therefore rare relics. The absence of clothing as a primary source meant reconsidering the proposed object-based methodology.

Carolyn Steedman argues that we should not be outraged by exclusions in the archive: researchers are accustomed to dealing with gaps and spaces. These require not only specialist knowledge but also intuition and sometimes dramatic leaps of faith. For Steedman, the historian's craft is in being able to "...conjure up a social system from a nutmeg grater."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as Deetz has argued, history is recorded in many ways and, traditionally, archival discourse emphasises the preservation of history through static documentation, such as paper records. Some asylum ledgers, patient reception orders (ie, admissions records), and official photographs of patients from Whittingham Asylum have survived, although often in poor condition. This written and visual material became the subject of close scrutiny. Without the institutionally issued garments themselves, what evidence was there to help understand issues of gender, class, and identity at Whittingham Asylum during 1907-1919?

### The Reception Orders: Certificates of Committal

The reception orders are in poor condition, and the writing is often difficult to decipher. Admissions documents were prescribed by statute.<sup>28</sup> Each one is titled Order for Reception of a Pauper Lunatic or Lunatic Found Wandering at Large (Figure 6 and Figure 9). As a result of changes to the Poor Law, and the introduction of The Lunacy Acts, the poor represented 90% of insane people in asylums across

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<sup>25</sup> James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, Anchor Books, New York, New York, United States, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital Tokens, 1740-1770*, Press to Press Ltd, Bristol, Gloucestershire, England, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, England, 2001, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Bartlett, op cit., p. 151.

England by the end of the late nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Amendments to the Poor Law in 1834 were to prevent unnecessary demands being made on public funds. Outdoor relief to the able-bodied poor was abolished. Relief for the able-bodied poor was to be given only in a regulated workhouse.

Insane paupers were cared for in the workhouses under the new Poor Law. The new system was harsh and designed to make the workhouse unappealing through the use of discipline. Workhouse uniforms were worn, making inmates identifiable. Husbands and wives were separated, both from each other and their families, and communicated with each other only with the permission of a master. Food was adequate but plain, and the work was tedious and hard.<sup>30</sup> Overcrowding, "...growing costs and controversies led to demands to oversee the care of idiots, imbeciles and epileptics".<sup>31</sup> Further, the Lunatics Act of 1845 made Commissioners in Lunacy responsible for the management of the growing numbers of the mentally ill.<sup>32</sup> This coincided with a change in attitudes in asylum care and an explosion in asylum construction.<sup>33</sup> Together, "...the Lunacy Acts provided the legal authority for close policing of the mad poor, and the Poor Law provided the administration."<sup>34</sup>

Committal to the asylum required the signatures of a medical officer and a Justice of the Peace. In all of the reception orders studied from Whittingham Asylum (1840–1930) the authorisation of women for detainment was made by men.<sup>35</sup> As has been argued, English psychiatry, as with all medical practice at this time, was dominated by men.<sup>36</sup> Following the certificate of committal is a section on personal information; name, age, and facts indicating insanity observed by the medical officer and by "others" (eg., family members, neighbours, etc.) as required by law.<sup>37</sup> This section also includes from where women were admitted, their domestic circumstance, or whether apprehended wandering at large.<sup>38</sup> The reception orders (or admission documents) of Ellen Fallows (Figure 6, Figure 7, and Figure 8) and Nancy Kirkham (Figure 9) are typical of many women admitted to Whittingham Asylum.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Bartlett discusses the growth of asylums throughout England, detailing how poor law officials in nineteenth century England made decisions about the care of pauper lunatics, asylum care, and workhouse admissions.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 38–39.

<sup>31</sup> Pettigrew, *op cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bartlett, *op cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 97–102.

<sup>36</sup> Showalter, *op cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Bartlett, *op cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

June 9 1911

HRW/12/1/14415

53 Vict. c. 5, Sched. 2. Form 12.

ORDER FOR RECEPTION OF A PAUPER LUNATIC, OR  
LUNATIC WANDERING AT LARGE.

I, Joseph Scholes having called  
to my assistance Charles Hubert James Kettle  
of 16 Dean Street, South Street, Manchester  
a duly qualified Medical Practitioner, and being satisfied that (\*)  
(a) Ellen Fellows is a pauper in receipt of relief (or in such  
circumstances as to require relief for her proper care and maintenance)  
and that the said Ellen Fellows is a  
(b) Person of unsound mind, and a proper person to be taken charge  
of and detained under care and treatment, ~~on that (\*)~~  
  
~~is a lunatic and was wandering at large, and is a proper person to be~~  
~~taken charge of and detained under care and treatment (\*)~~  
  
hereby direct you to receive the said Ellen Fellows  
as a patient into your (\*) Asylum Subjoined is a statement  
of particulars respecting the said Ellen Fellows  
(Signed) J. Scholes  
A Justice of the Peace for County Borough of Manchester  
Dated the 11th day of June 1911  
To (\*) Medical Superintendent, County Asylum at Warrington  
  
Lancaster 12.  
(53 Vict. c. 5, s. 10.)

[P.T.O.]

Figure 6:

Admission Document of Ellen Fellows, 9 June 1911,  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England,  
HRW-12-1-14415.



**STATEMENT OF PARTICULARS.**

**STATEMENT OF PARTICULARS referred to in the above or annexed order.**

*If any particulars are not known, the fact is to be so stated.*

[Where the patient is in the order described as an idiot, omit the particulars marked \*]

The following is a statement of Particulars relating to the said Ellen Fellows

Name of patient, with Christian name at length Ellen Fellows

Sex and age ... Female, 38 years of age

\*Married, single or widowed ... Single

\*Rank, profession or previous occupation (if any) Professional Singer

\*Religious persuasion ... Church of England

Residence at or immediately previous to the date  
hereof ... 104 Ribbles Road  
Blackpool

\*Whether first attack ... No

Age on first attack ... 26 years

When and where previously under care and treat-  
ment as a lunatic, idiot or person of unsound  
mind ... At County Asylum Durham  
12 or 14 years ago and at Gaol  
House London for 14 months up to  
October 1909 about 1 month

\*Duration of existing attack ... Not known

Supposed cause ... No

Whether subject to epilepsy ... No

Whether suicidal ... No

Whether dangerous to others, and in what way ... No

Whether any near relative has been afflicted with  
insanity ... Not to knowledge

Union to which lunatic is chargeable ... Fylde Union.

Names, Christian names and full postal addresses  
of one or more relatives of the patient ... Henry Gosson Moorhousilaw  
104 Ribbles Road Blackpool

Name of the person to whom notice of death to be  
sent, and full postal address, if not already  
given ... Same as above

(To be signed by the Relieving  
Officer or Outward)

(Signed) (1) Thomas Dixon  
Relieving Officer.  
Fylde Union  
Blackpool

Figure 7:

*Admission Document of Ellen Fellows, 9 June 1911,*  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England,  
HRW-12-1-14415.

1911

In the matter of Ellen Fellows

(d) Insert residence of patient. at (a) 104 Ribble Road  
 (b) County, city or borough. in the (b) Borough of Blackpool  
 (c) Insert profession or occupation, if any. (c) Professional Singer  
 as alleged lunatic.

I, the undersigned Charles Herbert Sawyer Vinty  
 do hereby certify as follows:—

1. I am a person registered under the Medical Act, 1858, and I am in the actual practice of the medical profession.

2. On the ninth day of June 1911  
 at (a) 104 Ribble Road  
 in the (c) Borough of Blackpool  
 I personally examined the said Ellen Fellows  
 and came to the conclusion that she is a person of unsound mind  
 and a proper person to be taken charge of and detained under care and treatment.

3. I formed this conclusion on the following grounds, viz:—

(a) Facts indicating insanity observed by myself at the time of examination (a) viz: When spoken to answers at random & then continues muttering to herself says that she is single but that her husband is in India

(b) Facts communicated by others (b), viz: Her sister Mr. Colson of 104 Ribble Road says she cannot make her understand anything

4. The said Ellen Fellows  
 appeared to me to be (i) in a fit condition of bodily health to be removed  
 to an asylum, hospital or licensed house (k)

5. I give this certificate, having first read the section of the Act of Parliament printed below.

Dated this 8th day of June One  
 Thousand Nine Hundred & eleven

(Signed) Chas. Vinty  
 of (i) 16 Bevan Street, Blackpool

(d) Insert full postal address.

Extract from section 827 of the Lunacy Act, 1890.

Lunacy 8.  
 827 Act. c. 8.

Any person who makes a wilful misstatement of any material fact in any medical or other certificate, or in any statement or report of bodily or mental condition under this Act, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour.

Figure 8:

*Admission Document of Ellen Fellows, 9 June 1911,*  
 ©Lancashire Archives and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England,  
 HRW-12-1-14415.



Figure 9:

*Admission Document of Nancy Alice Kirkham*, 15 February 1919,  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office, Preston, Lancashire, England,  
HRW-12-1-17311.

Ellen Fallows, shown in her admission portrait (Figure 10), was 38 years old and single when she was admitted to Whittingham Asylum in 1911.<sup>39</sup> Indications of her insanity included, “Muttering to herself and saying that her husband was in India.” Indications communicated by others included, “She cannot understand anything.”



Figure 10:  
*Admission Portrait of Ellen Fallows, 1911,*  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office,  
Preston, Lancashire, England, HRW-12-1-14415.

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<sup>39</sup> The surname of Ellen Fellows has been misspelt in this photograph as “Fallows.”

Nancy Alice Kirkham (Figure 11), an 18-year-old unmarried shop girl from Darwen, near Blackburn, Lancashire, England, was admitted to Whittingham Asylum in 1919 following an attack of epilepsy. Indications of her insanity included, “Struggles violently and requires powerful restraint, delusions and acute mania.” Indications communicated by others included, “Talking loudly in a strange manner” and “Has ideas about mother and child.”



Figure 11:  
*Admission Portrait of Nancy Alice Kirkham, 1919,*  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office,  
Preston, Lancashire, England, HRW-12-1-17311.

The admissions documents rarely provide any detailed insight into individual cases. The purpose of admission documents was to convince lunacy commissioners and local justices of the need for committal.<sup>40</sup> Scholars of insanity have observed that the voice of the female lunatic from the past is seldom heard. Furthermore, Hornstein has argued that the mad have often remained silent or spoke only in code; constant surveillance and punishment made speaking out risky. Pen and paper were often forbidden, especially for women.<sup>41</sup> Literature, rather than records, is the place to find a female perspective on insanity. For example, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) explore female madness in its social context, and as a reaction to the limitations of the feminine role that may itself have led to mental breakdown.<sup>42</sup> These accounts reflect exclusively the experiences of educated and either middle or upper class women. The reception orders reveal nothing obvious about the dress of the women featured. The significance of reception orders is that they are original documents, the content of which is directly related to each individual woman's experience of diagnosis, incarceration, treatment, and care.

### Textual Analysis: Paper Thin Evidence

The Structuralist writings of Roland Barthes and the Poststructuralist writings of Jacques Derrida offer methods of interpreting this written data from a social and cultural perspective rather than as factual medical records. In a well-rehearsed discourse on semiotic analysis of textiles, Barthes asserts, "Etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric," from which other meaning can be worked out.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Derrida's textual analysis has alerted the reader to other truths that may be concealed within it. Both authors argue that there is no singular reading of a text and there is no final authority for deciding its meaning.<sup>44</sup> Rather, each reading is dependent on the context of its interpretation. The subject of this article is female insanity explored through the lens of historical dress. Throughout history, women's appearance has been influenced by social, cultural, and ideological views of gender. Following on from Barthes and Derrida, analysis of the reception orders should focus on unpicking the underlying social and cultural conditions for women at this time, as these factors will have influenced patient dress.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> Hornstein, op cit., p. xii.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Translated from the French by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, New York, New York, United States, 1975, p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines" in Harold Bloom, ed., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, England, 1979, pp. 175-176.



Analysis of the reception orders, each reading, re-reading, criss-crossing of references of what is written down and by whom, reveals a system in place that supported social, cultural, and ideological views of women, and of poverty and the poor. Class, as well as gender, helped determine an individual's psychiatric diagnosis. These views were supported and enforced by the systems of patriarchal authority at this time. Ideological views on women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had consequences for social policy.<sup>45</sup> A close reading of the reception orders provided the context for analysis of the visual primary sources; the compelling official portraits of women patients. Ideological views of women, and the influence of these on appearance, provide evidence to consider how dress had a role to play in the vision, treatment, and management of female insanity.

### **Dress Communication: Reading Material**

Deetz has commented that the widespread use of photography by the mid nineteenth century provides the historical archaeologist with a valuable data source.<sup>46</sup> For the dress scholar, without the "object" itself, the portraits provide an important visual account of what female patients wore. Furthermore, Sontag has argued that picture taking acquired an authority greater than any verbal account in conveying the realities of the disappeared.<sup>47</sup> An important part of the overarching research for this article is through the examination of clothing, to expose hidden histories and previously unexposed communities. Within this wider context, the portraits are so much more than evidence of dress; they are a revealing snapshot of a community's lived experience. The images of the women generate compassionate responses. Their facial expressions, placement of hands (Figure 10), the use of mirror (Figure 11), and patient identity number in all, have generated intense discussion amongst many groups: the public, academics, health professionals, and others who have attended the different events held as part of the Whittingham Lives Arts and Heritage Project.

To evaluate the images within the discourse of dress, focus must be placed on the women's appearance, their clothing, and its meaning. The work of Roland Barthes is useful in helping with this analysis. Semiotics (or semiology) is the study of signs and derives from the linguistical theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who argued that all signs are arbitrary; their meaning is derived from oppositions to other

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<sup>45</sup> Showalter, op cit., p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Deetz, op cit., p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin, London, England, 2003, p. 21.



arbitrary signs used in the same system.<sup>48</sup> Barthes extended Saussure's thinking to other areas of art and culture. Semiotics has also been applied by scholars in fashion and textile disciplines as an analytical tool to decode and interpret meaning from clothing and textiles. In his influential book *The Fashion System* (1990), Barthes describes fashion/dress as a system of signs and signifying criteria that communicates meaning.<sup>49</sup> As well as garments, shapes and silhouettes, fabrics; colour, material, weight and pattern are included in Barthes "inventory of genera." In Barthes' theory, meaning is derived from oppositional logic, whereby an object is defined in relation to its difference to another object from the same system. Meaning is interpreted and understood by those who are part of the world of fashion. Barthes' approach enables us to consider asylum dress as being part of a much bigger system, one where distinctions and conventions impart meaning to objects, meaning which is understood by those who are part of that culture. It also enables the observer to consider the role of dress in defining patient identity as "different" or "other," both inside the asylum and outside in wider culture and society.

The visible garments in the photographs signify that standardised dress was the norm for female patients at Whittingham Asylum. Starched white aprons, chemises, skirts, and petticoats are documented. The writings of Pettigrew (1998), Hamlet and Hoskins (2013), Baur and Melling (2014) show that a minimum standard of dress was imposed on all patients in English county lunatic asylums throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the very poor. Whilst dress conformed to a middle class notion of respectability, garments often mirrored the clothing of respectable working class women elsewhere in society, with styles representative of moral and practical notions of order and cleanliness.<sup>50</sup>

Extravagant appearance in the working poor was seen to indicate vanity and improvidence. Following Barthes, it could be argued that too great a variety of dress for the poor weakened the visible distinction between social classes and challenged established hierarchies—hierarchies that were immediately signified and understood through clothing and appearance. As has been noted, for the female pauper lunatic, vanity and too much attention to dress (as well as too little) was discouraged by John

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Revised Edition, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, United States, 1986, pp. 119–123.

<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, Translated from the French by Matthew Ward and Richard Miller, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, United States, 1990, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins, "Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 1 March 2013, p. 94.

Conolly, resident physician at Middlesex County Asylum, 1839–1844. Dress was an indicator of women's weakness as well as their insanity. Clothing can be a disruptive form in creating instability around imposed structures.<sup>51</sup>

### Ladylike Behaviour: Feminine Decorum

The decorative shawl collars worn by each of the women in the photographic portraits are at odds against the indestructible looking, sombre utilitarian dress, and the women's arranged and tidy hair. However, the idea of patients choosing to accessorise their individual dress (Figure 12 and Figure 13) should be approached with caution.



Figure 12:  
*Admission Portrait of Sarah Davies, 1907,*  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office,  
Preston, Lancashire, England, HRW-12-1-13504.

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<sup>51</sup> Derrida, op cit., 1979.



Figure 13:  
*Admission Portrait of Mary Speed, 1908,*  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office,  
Preston, Lancashire, England, HRW-12-1-13585.

Sontag has pointed out that nineteenth century photography quickly became an important tool in surveillance and control, particularly in institutions that needed to identify inmates.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in *Presumed Curable*, Gale and Howard have drawn attention to how images of people can provide a false impression of the way patients were treated.<sup>53</sup> Whilst the photographer may have wanted to pose the women for identification purposes, many of the women look lost, others scared, and many seem unaware of the camera. All the women look as if they have been seated in a particular way, perhaps at someone's bidding, and for a particular purpose. The photographs were taken within the institutional power dynamics of the asylum system at this time in history; any reading of the content should be situated within this context.

The collars portrayed in the admission photographs may well have been the handiwork of female patients. Manual tasks, reflecting a paternalistic element, were considered to be part of recovery and care.<sup>54</sup> "Feminine" occupations played an important role in the moral therapy for women.<sup>55</sup> Activities such as sewing and needlework (Figure 14) were encouraged as a way of fostering femininity; sewing materials were readily available.<sup>56</sup> Feminist scholars have discussed embroidery and needlework clearly within changing social and cultural notions of femininity.<sup>57</sup> Whilst sewing activities have provided pleasure for women, sewing activities have also been linked historically to women's passivity and powerlessness.<sup>58</sup> Read from this position, the collars are more than accessories; they are a potent signifier of early twentieth century feminine ideology; a woman's skill with a needle had a large part to play in this.

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<sup>52</sup> Sontag, op cit., p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Colin Gale Robert Howard, *Presumed Curable: An Illustrated Casebook of Victorian Pyschiatric Patients in Bethlem Hosptal*, Wrightston Biomedical Publishing Ltd, Petersfield, Hampshire, England, 2003, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Bartlett, op cit., p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> Showalter, op cit., p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> Hornstein, op cit., p. xii.

<sup>57</sup> Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Women's Press, London, England, 1984, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.





Figure 14:  
*Whittingham Asylum Hospital Ward*, Date Unknown,  
©Lancashire Archives and Record Office,  
Preston, Lancashire, England.

As part of the research project, *Dressed for the Part*, from which the 2018 exhibition was based, many of the decorative collars portrayed in the asylum photographs were replicated and documented as artefact and as an object of social and cultural feminine ideology (Figure 15).





Figure 15:  
*Dressed for the Part: Feminine Decorum (3)*,  
 Carole Hunt and Alex Hurst, 2017,  
 Whittingham Lives: Hidden Histories,  
 Alternative Futures Exhibition,  
 Harris Museum and Library,  
 Preston, England, November 2018,  
 © Carole Hunt,  
 Photographed by Alex Hurst,  
 10 October 2018.

### Wearing Your Label: Dress and Stigma

Uniformity of female patient dress at Whittingham Asylum may well have been for practical reasons. Patients only began to have their garments tagged with their name after the First World War. Up until the First World War, it was common for all dress items to be marked with the identity of the wards; patients wore clothing that belonged to their ward. “Easy identification may well have supported the laundry system.”<sup>59</sup> To the asylum visitor, standardised clothing signified a well-run asylum; the patients were “...orderly, free from excitement and satisfactorily clothed.”<sup>60</sup> All asylums across England kept careful accounts, and there was always pressure to control costs.<sup>61</sup> It would have been much easier and more economical to keep track of a limited range of styles and fabrics.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, escapees could be easily recognised by their clothing. The economic importance as well as the social and therapeutic value of patient labour in asylums is well documented.<sup>63 64</sup> However, “...whilst the authorities

<sup>59</sup> Baur, op cit., p. 159.

<sup>60</sup> Pettigrew, op cit., p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> Hamlet, op cit., p. 103.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>63</sup> Pettigrew, op cit., p. 68.

<sup>64</sup> Bartlett, op cit., pp. 211–212.

extolled the values of patient work we do not know what the patients themselves thought of this compulsory aspect of asylum life.”<sup>65</sup>

Lunacy reformers in the early and mid nineteenth century emphasised that the asylum was to provide a safe and humane environment to assist recovery.<sup>66</sup> “Standardised clothing was not meant to be punitive.”<sup>67</sup> Rather, authorities thought it a moral and physical improvement for patients, part of the paternalistic environment and treatment regime.<sup>68</sup> However, as Woolf commented, clothes have more important roles in life than merely practical ones.<sup>69</sup> It could also be argued that patient dress carried a double stigmatisation, defining the woman as both pauper and certified lunatic; institutional identity was manifest in patient dress. With reference to Barthes, patient dress can be understood as part of a system, one where distinctions in appearance were an important part of the daily asylum regimen. Dress and its signifying criteria—shape, colour, fabric, weight, and pattern—conveyed messages around the identity, gender, class, and status of the wearer. Furthermore, dress marked female patients out as “different,” or “other,” a person belonging to a different group in society. Women diagnosed with mental illness during the early twentieth century were, quite literally, “Dressed for the Part.”

## Conclusion

This article set out to examine the relationship between gender, mental illness, clothing, and identity during late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. Analysis of the available evidence from Whittingham Asylum has been contextualised within a wider discussion about the admission, treatment, and care of pauper lunatics during this period. Asylum dress had a key role in defining the place of women in the asylum, in the management and treatment of their mental illnesses, and even perhaps in the diagnosis. Clothing also reinforced the ideological and culturally subservient and conforming roles of women in society more widely. The article concludes that social and cultural norms in relation to women concerning dress, respectability, and femininity informed not only how women should look, but also defined how they should “be.” Clothing identified the patient as female, moral, pauper, lunatic, and inmate. Lunacy had its own particular language of dress. This article has also raised questions for the archive and the museum around “collecting” and the “collection” in terms of value: what is saved and what is discarded, and by whom. For the dress

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<sup>65</sup> Pettigrew, *op cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>67</sup> Hamlet, *op cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>69</sup> Woolf, *op cit.*, p. 143.

scholar, the dress artefact is a valuable source of information, especially so when other evidence is scarce.

What is not heard, in this article, is the voice of any female patient, except in some small way through fragments of reported speech in the reception orders. Clothes are at the interface between the body and its social presentation. They signify to the wider world who and what the person is, and in so doing they endorse much of our sense of our personal and social identity. Actual patient accounts of their experiences are rare, and artefacts of everyday institutional clothing are even rarer. Photographs may not have the absorbency of cloth, the marks and stains of everyday interaction and wear, but photographs provide a visible record, a snapshot of real events. Interpretation and analysis of these through the lens of dress research has shown a glimpse into the lives of female patients and the regimes under which they lived, whose own words about their experiences we can never hear. Regulation, it seems, did not prevent Agnes Emma Richter from constructing an identity around her institutional garment. Did Agnes embroider her jacket to hold on to a sense of identity or to preserve important memories of her incarceration? Her jacket remains a tantalising clue into an almost unknowable world.

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